



# *CASE CLIPS*

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**TOYOTA MOTOR MANUFACTURING, KENTUCKY, INC. v. WILLIAMS, No. 00-1089 (Jan. 8, 2002).**

**O'CONNOR, J., delivered the opinion for a unanimous Court.**

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA or Act), 104 Stat. 328, [42 U.S.C. § 12101](#) et seq. (1994 ed. and Supp. V), a physical impairment that "substantially limits one or more ... major life activities" is a "disability." [42 U.S.C. § 12102\(2\)\(A\)](#) (1994 ed.). Respondent, claiming to be disabled because of her carpal tunnel syndrome and other related impairments, sued petitioner, her former employer, for failing to provide her with a reasonable accommodation as required by the ADA. See [§ 12112\(b\)\(5\)\(A\)](#). The District Court granted summary judgment to petitioner, finding that respondent's impairments did not substantially limit any of her major life activities. The Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit reversed, finding that the impairments substantially limited respondent in the major life activity of performing manual tasks, and therefore granting partial summary judgment to respondent on the issue of whether she was disabled under the ADA. We conclude that the Court of Appeals did not apply the proper standard in making this determination because it analyzed only a limited class of manual tasks and failed to ask whether respondent's impairments prevented or restricted her from performing tasks that are of central importance to most people's daily lives.

....

The ADA requires covered entities, including private employers, to provide "reasonable accommodations to the known physical or mental limitations of an otherwise qualified individual with a disability who is an applicant or employee, unless such covered entity can demonstrate that the accommodation would impose an undue hardship." [42 U.S.C. § 12112\(b\)\(5\)\(A\)](#) (1994 ed.); see also [§ 12111\(2\)](#) ("The term 'covered entity' means an employer, employment agency, labor organization, or joint labor-management committee"). The Act defines a "qualified individual with a disability" as "an individual with a disability who, with or without reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the employment position that such individual holds or desires." [§ 12111\(8\)](#). In turn, a "disability" is: "(A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (B) a record of such an impairment; or (C) being regarded as having such an impairment." [§ 12102\(2\)](#).

....

The persuasive authority of the EEOC regulations is less clear. As we have previously noted, see [Sutton v. United Air Lines, Inc., 527 U.S. 471, 479, 119 S.Ct. 2139, 144 L.Ed.2d 450 \(1999\)](#), no agency has been given authority to issue regulations interpreting the term "disability" in the ADA. Nonetheless, the EEOC has done so. See [29 CFR §§ 1630.2\(g\)-\(j\) \(2001\)](#). Because both parties accept the EEOC regulations as reasonable, we assume without deciding that they are, and we have no occasion to decide what level of deference, if any, they are due. [Citations omitted.]

... The Rehabilitation Act regulations issued by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) in 1977, which appear without change in the current regulations issued by the Department of Health and Human Services, define "physical impairment," the type of impairment relevant to this case, to mean "any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive, digestive, genito-urinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; and endocrine." [45 CFR § 84.3\(j\)\(2\)\(i\) \(2001\)](#). . . .

Merely having an impairment does not make one disabled for purposes of the ADA. Claimants also need to demonstrate that the impairment limits a major life activity. See [42 U.S.C. § 12102\(2\)\(A\) \(1994 ed.\)](#). The HEW Rehabilitation Act regulations provide a list of examples of "major life activities," that includes "walking, seeing, hearing," and, as relevant here, "performing manual tasks." [45 CFR § 84.3\(j\)\(2\)\(ii\) \(2001\)](#). To qualify as disabled, a claimant must further show that the limitation on the major life activity is "substantial[1]." [42 U.S.C. § 12102\(2\)\(A\)](#). Unlike "physical impairment" and "major life activities," the HEW regulations do not define the term "substantially limits." [Citation omitted.] The EEOC, therefore, has created its own definition for purposes of the ADA. According to the EEOC regulations, "substantially limit[ed]" means "[u]nable to perform a major life activity that the average person in the general population can perform"; or "[s]ignificantly restricted as to the condition, manner or duration under which an individual can perform a particular major life activity as compared to the condition, manner, or duration under which the average person in the general population can perform that same major life activity." [29 CFR § 1630.2\(j\) \(2001\)](#). In determining whether an individual is substantially limited in a major life activity, the regulations instruct that the following factors should be considered: "[t]he nature and severity of the impairment; [t]he duration or expected duration of the impairment; and [t]he permanent or long-term impact, or the expected permanent or long-term impact of or resulting from the impairment." [§§ 1630.2\(j\)\(2\)\(i\)-\(iii\)](#).

The parties do not dispute that respondent's medical conditions, which include carpal tunnel syndrome, myotendinitis, and thoracic outlet compression, amount to physical impairments. The relevant question, therefore, is whether the Sixth Circuit correctly analyzed whether these impairments substantially limited respondent in the major life activity of performing manual tasks. Answering this requires us to address an issue about which the EEOC regulations are silent: what a plaintiff must demonstrate to establish a substantial limitation in the specific major life activity of performing manual tasks.

Our consideration of this issue is guided first and foremost by the words of the disability definition itself. "[S]ubstantially" in the phrase "substantially limits" suggests "considerable" or "to a large degree." See Webster's Third New International Dictionary 2280 (1976) (defining "substantially" as "in a substantial manner" and "substantial" as "considerable in amount, value, or worth" and "being that specified to a large degree or in the main"); see also 17 Oxford English Dictionary 66-67 (2d ed.1989) ("substantial": "[r]elating to or proceeding from the essence of a

thing; essential"; "[o]f ample or considerable amount, quantity, or dimensions"). The word "substantial" thus clearly precludes impairments that interfere in only a minor way with the performance of manual tasks from qualifying as disabilities. Cf. [Albertson's, Inc. v. Kirkingburg](#), 527 U.S., at 565, 119 S.Ct. 2162 (explaining that a "mere difference" does not amount to a "significant restric [tion]" and therefore does not satisfy the EEOC's interpretation of "substantially limits").

"Major" in the phrase "major life activities" means important. See Webster's, *supra*, at 1363 (defining "major" as "greater in dignity, rank, importance, or interest"). "Major life activities" thus refers to those activities that are of central importance to daily life. In order for performing manual tasks to fit into this category--a category that includes such basic abilities as walking, seeing, and hearing--the manual tasks in question must be central to daily life. If each of the tasks included in the major life activity of performing manual tasks does not independently qualify as a major life activity, then together they must do so.

That these terms need to be interpreted strictly to create a demanding standard for qualifying as disabled is confirmed by the first section of the ADA, which lays out the legislative findings and purposes that motivate the Act. See [42 U.S.C. § 12101](#). When it enacted the ADA in 1990, Congress found that "some 43,000,000 Americans have one or more physical or mental disabilities." [§ 12101\(a\)\(1\)](#). If Congress intended everyone with a physical impairment that precluded the performance of some isolated, unimportant, or particularly difficult manual task to qualify as disabled, the number of disabled Americans would surely have been much higher. Cf. [Sutton v. United Air Lines, Inc.](#), 527 U.S., at 487, 119 S.Ct. 2139 (finding that because more than 100 million people need corrective lenses to see properly, "[h]ad Congress intended to include all persons with corrected physical limitations among those covered by the Act, it undoubtedly would have cited a much higher number than 43 million disabled persons in the findings").

[Footnote omitted.] We therefore hold that to be substantially limited in performing manual tasks, an individual must have an impairment that prevents or severely restricts the individual from doing activities that are of central importance to most people's daily lives. The impairment's impact must also be permanent or long-term. See [29 CFR §§ 1630.2\(j\)\(2\)\(ii\)-\(iii\) \(2001\)](#).

It is insufficient for individuals attempting to prove disability status under this test to merely submit evidence of a medical diagnosis of an impairment. Instead, the ADA requires those "claiming the Act's protection ... to prove a disability by offering evidence that the extent of the limitation [caused by their impairment] in terms of their own experience ... is substantial." [Albertson's, Inc. v. Kirkingburg](#), *supra*, at 567, 119 S.Ct. 2162 (holding that monocular vision is not invariably a disability, but must be analyzed on an individual basis, taking into account the individual's ability to compensate for the impairment). That the Act defines "disability" "with respect to an individual," [42 U.S.C. § 12102\(2\)](#), makes clear that Congress intended the existence of a disability to be determined in such a case-by-case manner. [Citations omitted.]

An individualized assessment of the effect of an impairment is particularly necessary when the impairment is one whose symptoms vary widely from person to person. Carpal tunnel syndrome, one of respondent's impairments, is just such a condition. While cases of severe carpal tunnel syndrome are characterized by muscle atrophy and extreme sensory deficits, mild cases generally do not have either of these effects and create only intermittent symptoms of numbness and tingling. [Citation omitted.] Studies have further shown that, even without surgical treatment, one quarter of carpal tunnel cases resolve in one month, but that in 22 percent of cases, symptoms last for eight years or longer. [Citation omitted.] When pregnancy is the cause of carpal tunnel syndrome, in contrast, the symptoms normally resolve

within two weeks of delivery. [Citation omitted.] Given these large potential differences in the severity and duration of the effects of carpal tunnel syndrome, an individual's carpal tunnel syndrome diagnosis, on its own, does not indicate whether the individual has a disability within the meaning of the ADA.

#### IV

The Court of Appeals' analysis of respondent's claimed disability suggested that in order to prove a substantial limitation in the major life activity of performing manual tasks, a "plaintiff must show that her manual disability involves a 'class' of manual activities," and that those activities "affect[t] the ability to perform tasks at work." See [224 F.3d, at 843](#). Both of these ideas lack support.

The Court of Appeals relied on our opinion in [Sutton v. United Air Lines, Inc.](#), for the idea that a "class" of manual activities must be implicated for an impairment to substantially limit the major life activity of performing manual tasks. [224 F.3d, at 843](#). But [Sutton](#) said only that "[w]hen the major life activity under consideration is that of working, the statutory phrase 'substantially limits' requires ... that plaintiffs allege that they are unable to work in a broad class of jobs." [527 U.S., at 491, 119 S.Ct. 2139](#) (emphasis added). Because of the conceptual difficulties inherent in the argument that working could be a major life activity, we have been hesitant to hold as much, and we need not decide this difficult question today. In [Sutton](#), we noted that even assuming that working is a major life activity, a claimant would be required to show an inability to work in a "broad range of jobs," rather than a specific job. [Id., at 492, 119 S.Ct. 2139](#). But [Sutton](#) did not suggest that a class-based analysis should be applied to any major life activity other than working. Nor do the EEOC regulations. In defining "substantially limits," the EEOC regulations only mention the "class" concept in the context of the major life activity of working. [Citation omitted.] Nothing in the text of the Act, our previous opinions, or the regulations suggests that a class-based framework should apply outside the context of the major life activity of working.

While the Court of Appeals in this case addressed the different major life activity of performing manual tasks, its analysis circumvented [Sutton](#) by focusing on respondent's inability to perform manual tasks associated only with her job. This was error. When addressing the major life activity of performing manual tasks, the central inquiry must be whether the claimant is unable to perform the variety of tasks central to most people's daily lives, not whether the claimant is unable to perform the tasks associated with her specific job. Otherwise, [Sutton's](#) restriction on claims of disability based on a substantial limitation in working will be rendered meaningless because an inability to perform a specific job always can be recast as an inability to perform a "class" of tasks associated with that specific job.

There is also no support in the Act, our previous opinions, or the regulations for the Court of Appeals' idea that the question of whether an impairment constitutes a disability is to be answered only by analyzing the effect of the impairment in the workplace. Indeed, the fact that the Act's definition of "disability" applies not only to Title I of the Act, [42 U.S.C. §§ 12111-12117 \(1994 ed.\)](#), which deals with employment, but also to the other portions of the Act, which deal with subjects such as public transportation, §§ 12141-12150, [42 U.S.C. §§ 12161-12165 \(1994 ed. and Supp. V\)](#), and privately provided public accommodations, §§ 12181-12189, demonstrates that the definition is intended to cover individuals with disabling impairments regardless of whether the individuals have any connection to a workplace.

Even more critically, the manual tasks unique to any particular job are not necessarily important parts of most people's lives. As a result, occupation-specific tasks may have only

limited relevance to the manual task inquiry. In this case, "repetitive work with hands and arms extended at or above shoulder levels for extended periods of time," [224 F.3d, at 843](#), the manual task on which the Court of Appeals relied, is not an important part of most people's daily lives. The court, therefore, should not have considered respondent's inability to do such manual work in her specialized assembly line job as sufficient proof that she was substantially limited in performing manual tasks.

At the same time, the Court of Appeals appears to have disregarded the very type of evidence that it should have focused upon. It treated as irrelevant "[t]he fact that [respondent] can ... ten[d] to her personal hygiene [and] carr[y] out personal or household chores." [Ibid.](#) Yet household chores, bathing, and brushing one's teeth are among the types of manual tasks of central importance to people's daily lives, and should have been part of the assessment of whether respondent was substantially limited in performing manual tasks.

The District Court noted that at the time respondent sought an accommodation from petitioner, she admitted that she was able to do the manual tasks required by her original two jobs in QCIO.App. to Pet. for Cert. A-36. In addition, according to respondent's deposition testimony, even after her condition worsened, she could still brush her teeth, wash her face, bathe, tend her flower garden, fix breakfast, do laundry, and pick up around the house. App. 32-34. The record also indicates that her medical conditions caused her to avoid sweeping, to quit dancing, to occasionally seek help dressing, and to reduce how often she plays with her children, gardens, and drives long distances. *Id.*, at 32, 38-39. But these changes in her life did not amount to such severe restrictions in the activities that are of central importance to most people's daily lives that they establish a manual-task disability as a matter of law. On this record, it was therefore inappropriate for the Court of Appeals to grant partial summary judgment to respondent on the issue whether she was substantially limited in performing manual tasks, and its decision to do so must be reversed.

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